

# CH'AN NEWS LETTER

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## Five Skandhas: False and Unreal

(Lecture delivered by Master Sheng-yen on the Surangama Sutra, July 13, 1986)

Today's passage from the Sutra speaks about the five skandhas. Also known as the five aggregates, together they constitute what is commonly considered to be the self or ego. The five skandhas are form (Skt: *rupa*), sensation (*vedana*), perception or conception (*sanjna*), impulse, volition, or activation (*samskara*), and consciousness (*vijnana*).

There are many lines in this passage and the Buddha uses a number of analogies, but there is essentially one point. It is expressed in a single line of the Heart Sutra: the five skandhas and emptiness are one and the same.

Ordinary sentient beings take the five skandhas to be the self. Hinayana practitioners consider the five skandhas to be other than the self. Mahayana practitioners, however, are of the understanding that while it is true that the skandhas are not the self, it is equally true that the self cannot be separated from the skandhas. Thus in the Mahayana view, you cannot attain Buddhahood apart from the five skandhas. But the ordinary view is that Buddhahood is comprised of nothing but the five skandhas. The Mahayana practitioner, then, is neither attached to the idea of the five skandhas, nor would he or she be attached to the idea of their non-existence.

According to the sutra, the five skandhas can be divided into the physical, the first skandha, and the mental, the remaining four.

An idealist, who believes in the preeminence of the mental realm would concentrate on the last four skandhas. A materialist, who believes that all spiritual things are ultimately derived from matter, would concern himself solely with the first skandha. Buddhism recognizes both the physical and the mental realms, but the fact that four of the five skandhas are mind-oriented indicates the importance accorded the mental aspect. The world, the universe – all life – comes from this combination of matter and mind. Matter cannot exist apart from mind; mind cannot exist apart from matter.

Some may object to this view. We know that there are many many life forms on this planet, and perhaps some life forms on other planets in our solar system. One could make a case for a fair mixture of mind and matter in our immediate solar vicinity, so to speak. But in the far reaches of the universe where there seem to be great lifeless stretches of space, how can there be life there? How can we make such a comprehensive generalization that mind always exists with matter?



There is really no need to speak of other galaxies or other areas in the universe. Right here on our own planet, if we delve deep enough below the earth's surface, we can undoubtedly reach areas where there are no life forms. The same is true if we ascend high enough above the atmosphere. The Dead Sea, too, is lifeless as is the stone deep inside great mountains.

Nonetheless, we often extract minerals or chemicals from deep inside the earth or the mountains, and even though these do not contain life in and of themselves, they relate – often directly – to our lives. We build buildings of stone. We use oil to power our cars. The elements do affect us, and in many ways they are a part of us.

Let us return to the five skandhas. The first skandha, form, refers to all physical objects in whatever shape they may assume. Why do we use the word “form” to refer to all physical existence? In English, form refers to the shape of something, the way in which it occupies physical space. The term used in Chinese, *ssu*, is actually the word for color. This may seem a strange rendering for the concept of form, but it is probably a better choice than the English word, form, which is rather restricted in its meaning. “Color” as it is described in Chinese, denotes anything that can block the line of sight, that cuts off the view of the eye. Only a physical entity can block the eye. Is there any physical entity that will not block the eye? The air or wind or any colorless gas might satisfy this criterion.

Form is further divided into “internal” and “external.” In both cases form is comprised of the four elements, earth, water, wind, and fire. These elements are directly affected by the forces of mind and karma. It is fairly easy to understand the workings of internal form. This is your own mind/body. If you consider some action, or if karmic forces are such that you become ill, then the four elements within you move in a particular way. It is not hard to see that you are responsible for this movement. On the other hand, most

of you would probably consider the external four elements to be nature, something totally unrelated to you. But this is really not the case. The movement of all external form occurs only as the result of the mental and karmic activity of all sentient beings in this world. But since this external form is the product of the activity of all sentient beings, it may be difficult for an individual to see how he or she contributes to changes in the external four elements.

It is because of the great power that mental activity exerts on the body, mind, and the external world that Buddhadharma places such emphasis on the mind. Thus, as we said earlier, Buddhadharma assigns four of the five skandhas to the mental realm.

To the Hinayana practitioner the five skandhas are absolutely false. But the Mahayana practitioner, as it is shown in the Surangama Sutra, understands that Buddha-nature – True Suchness – Tathagata-garbha – cannot be found outside of the five skandhas.

Tathagata-garbha is a mental, not a physical dharma. “Garbha” means a storehouse. What is it that it stores? True Suchness – the Buddha-mind. To discover this True Suchness, this Buddha-mind, and to transform the world of ordinary sentient beings into this true world, we must go further than the physical world. We must understand the dharma of the mind.

Let us now turn to the mental skandhas. The sutra gives an analogy for each one of the skandhas, but I am not going to use these analogies. I will first explain what the five skandhas – the five aggregates – are, and then I will show how they are both false and at the same time how Buddha-nature – True Suchness – Tathagata-garbha is not separate from them.

After form, we have first sensation, that is, what we feel or sense; then perception or conception, the ideas we have and how we think and reason;



then volition, impulse, or activation, the ideas of action or will that arise in the mind; and, finally, consciousness.

Note that the consciousness referred to here is the eighth consciousness (Skt: *alaya-vijnana* – storehouse consciousness). After we perform an action, the consequences – the karma of that action – are planted in this eighth consciousness. The first four skandhas that we have spoken about, form, sensation, perception, and volition relate only to the first six consciousnesses. These are the consciousnesses that correspond to each of our five senses and the awareness that arises when one of these five senses comes into contact with a sense object. The awareness that results from this contact gives rise to the sixth consciousness. [Note: for a further discussion of consciousness, see Ch'an Newsletter No. 63]

You might wonder what happened to the seventh consciousness. This is the consciousness that contains the most profound sense of self. It interprets all phenomena that occur to you in such a way that a sense of self is established. This seventh consciousness takes the eighth consciousness to be the self. While we are alive, the first six consciousnesses continue to function. When we die, they disappear. But the eighth consciousness continues. This consciousness is the storehouse of all the karmic seeds we have accumulated through all of our previous actions. They are planted in the eighth consciousness by the self-conceiving function of the seventh consciousness.

The eighth consciousness is, in a sense, a lazy, easy-going, overseer. It doesn't care whether you take something out or you put something in. But there is a very sharp, jealous gatekeeper guarding the storehouse. He holds on very tightly to everything in the storehouse as if it were his own self. This is how the seventh consciousness functions.

The eighth consciousness would be quite useless without the seventh consciousness. It would be

nothing more than a receptacle to take things out of and to put things into. It is through the action of the seventh consciousness that our self-identified karmic seeds are stored, and we are kept moving from life to life in the realm of samsara.

Let us return to the second skandha, sensation. There are five kinds of sensations: suffering or pain, happiness, worry, joy, and a fifth which has the literal meaning of "dropping or casting off," and which amounts to something akin to indifference. Nevertheless, it, too, is a vexation.

When you are in the midst of suffering, no doubt you suffer. When you are in the midst of happiness, no doubt you are happy. But there are really no objective criteria for these perceptions. What may cause one person a great deal of pain, may be perceived by another as an opportunity for growth. You could quite possibly be content in the midst of suffering. On the other hand, if you do certain things that you usually consider as pleasurable – drinking or smoking, let us say – to excess, then you may no longer regard these activities as agreeable. There is no objective way to measure these perceptions. How something is perceived depends on your state of mind.

For two people to live well together, it does not simply depend on shared activities or hobbies. What is important is a shared understanding and a common purpose in life. An initial perception of someone as attractive may wear thin after what you originally found attractive holds no interest for you, and there is nothing deeper to take its place. Many relationships fall apart for this reason. But with common meaning and common purpose, it is possible for two people to be quite content with their lives together.

Attitudes, perceptions, and feelings about people, places, and things are determined by subjective states of mind. There really are no objective criteria. Some people find pleasure in sadomasochism. Most people regard such behavior as strange and bizarre. But to the participants it is



an acceptable way of relating. There are no standards of perception.

Now I will talk about the third skandha, conception, which contains our thoughts and ideas. These elements of ideation are constantly in a state of change. So long as they are in this state of flux, they have no real existence. Thoughts in our mind are like drops in a waterfall, changing, mixing, separating in a rapid succession. The water-nature of the waterfall may not change, but the individual molecules of water move and change at rapid pace.

Our minds are just too dull to perceive this torrent of thoughts within ourselves. Only the grossest thoughts are perceptible. Subtle thoughts pass beneath our awareness. But no matter what thoughts pass through our mind, perceived or unperceived, they are all false. They have no real existence.

For the expedient purpose of Buddhadharma, especially for the beginner, there is the concept of right thought, to be distinguished from illusory thought. But at higher levels of practice, all thoughts, both "right" and "illusory" are discarded. The thought, "I want to attain Buddhahood," may seem to be a noble thought, but it is nevertheless an illusion. With such a thought, you will never attain Buddhahood.

Such statements as "This is my idea", "This is my conception", "This is my philosophy," are really hopeless illusions.

You may ask if it is proper for us to have our own opinions about the goings-on of the world. After all, we are still ordinary sentient beings, and we cannot dispense with our perceptions and conceptions.

The word conception also connotes dreams, wishes, imaginings, and illusions. We dream at night and we dream during the day. When we

think, we believe that our thoughts are clear, but nonetheless, we are still dreaming. All thoughts, ideas, and conceptions that pass through our minds are dreams, and we will not awake to this understanding until we reach Buddhahood. There will then be no conceptions.

The fourth skandha is translated in a variety of ways: "volition," "impulse," or "activation." Once ideas, thoughts, or conceptions have arisen in your mind, there is a tendency for you to have an impulse to actually do something, to perform some action. If, for example, you see a beautiful woman, and think, "I have to go after her," and that is exactly what you do, then you are in the realm of the fourth skandha. Note that no act can be performed without the idea of action first forming in the mind. That is why this skandha is classified as volition or activation. If you only think about doing something — if you only intend and do not act — then that is only in the realm of the third skandha, conception. Thoughts without action only generate minor karma. Only when mind, body, and speech combine in action is there absolute certainty that karmic seeds will be planted in your eighth consciousness.

It is important to understand that these occurrences of volition, impulse, and activation have no real existence in and of themselves because they are constantly moving, changing, and disappearing. These acts of will and their consequences may first seem to be truly awesome or terrifying: they determine whether we go to heaven or to hell. In heaven we enjoy the consequences of our actions. But this enjoyment is itself a kind of activation, and once the fruits of our previous good karma are exhausted, we might find ourselves cast down into the suffering of hell because of our previous bad karma. But what the Surangama Sutra tells us is that, yes, we must be responsible for our actions, but there is no need to be afraid of them, because such fear generates attachment.



You must realize that once you practice to the point where you transcend the three realms of desire, form, and formlessness, and once you transcend birth and death and attain Buddhahood, there will be no volition, impulse, or activation for you. You may have to pay for past actions, but you will no longer create karma.

What is most important is to practice and continue practicing. Do not fear the bad karma of the past. There is no reason for you to think that there is no hope for you because of what you have done previously. Do not be concerned with the fact that even as you practice you simultaneously generate bad karma. There is no need to worry. Keep practicing.

We now come to the last skandha, consciousness. I have explained earlier that this is really the eighth consciousness, and that it is the storehouse for the karmic seeds planted by our perceptions, conceptions, and activations. But as I have shown, these perceptions, conceptions, and activations are themselves false and unreal, and thus the seeds that they generate have no real existence. The eighth consciousness, therefore, is really a storehouse of illusions. Nothing within it is real.

The storehouse itself is none other than True Suchness, Buddha-nature. It is itself Buddhahood.

Does this mean that we have already attained Buddhahood? If in fact everything is an illusion, can't we assume that we have achieved all that there is to achieve and that we can do whatever we like? Can we not rob and kill with impunity? Are we not already Buddhas? Is this the point of the sutra?

No, the sutra sets forth a path for us, it does not give us license to do whatever we feel. We must try to free ourselves from illusions, to understand our own minds, and to progress ever higher in the practice. We must be responsible for our actions. We must keep the precepts. We must practice samadhi to attain wisdom, and we must achieve purity of mind. Tathagata-garbha will then be the same as True Suchness. But until we reach the point where our mind is truly undefiled, our Tathagata-garbha will continue to store the karmic seeds of our actions, and we will continue to bear the responsibility for this karma; and we will continue to have perceptions that are rooted in illusion: of happiness, joy, love, hatred, worry, indifference.





## Rutgers Meditation Club

Chris Marano

In the summer of 1988, Professor Yu of Rutgers University invited me to speak to her Buddhism class on the practical application of Ch'an Buddhism. I jumped at the opportunity. Students showed more than a passing interest, so I asked Professor Yu if there was a Buddhist meditation club on campus. She told me there used to be one in the past, but it had disbanded because of lack of interest.



A light went off in my head. I asked Shih-fu if he thought I had enough experience to teach others meditation methods and basic Buddhadharma. Shih-fu said it would be okay to do so. In turn I gave Professor Yu the go ahead signal, and she officially formed the Rutgers Meditation Club.

By word-of-mouth, more than a dozen people showed up the first night, and since then attendance has been steady. In the first year a wide range of people have attended. Sessions meet every Monday evenings from 8:30 til 10:30 in Bush Student Center in Piscataway, except during semester breaks and summer recess.

After a few weeks of smoothing out administrative wrinkles, attendance stabilized at about 15 to 20 people. There have been days when only two people have shown up, but there have also been days when there weren't enough cushions to go around.

Meetings usually consist of two half hour sittings. We do stretching exercise, self-massage, and sometimes slow walk meditation. I also pass along what I learned in Shih-fu's beginner's meditation class. In between sittings I often answer questions (as long as they are simple enough), and I talk about some of the more basic Buddhist principles.

All of the students who regularly attend the sessions tell me that as a result of meditation they have witnessed marked changes for the better in their lives. A few students showed such an avid interest that I invited them to sit in my home one other evening during the week. And like icing on cake, four of the club members attended a seven day retreat with Shih-fu at the Ch'an Center this May. They all had good experiences, and they have communicated their desire to attend more retreats in the future. Hopefully they will spark the same enthusiasm in other club members.

The Rutgers Meditation Club will start up sessions again in September of 1989, and we look forward to seeing fresh faces. The club is open to anyone interested in meditation; it's not necessary to be a Rutgers student. We invite you to sit with us. It is an informal place where people can come to practice whenever they wish. There is no pressure or commitment. It exists for students and non-students to make use of. In a way, it can also be viewed as an affiliate group of the Ch'an Center, and as a stepping stone to Shih-fu and his teachings.

The Rutgers Meditation Club has also helped my practice. For people who find it difficult to sit with consistency on their own — like me — the existence of such a club is a blessing.

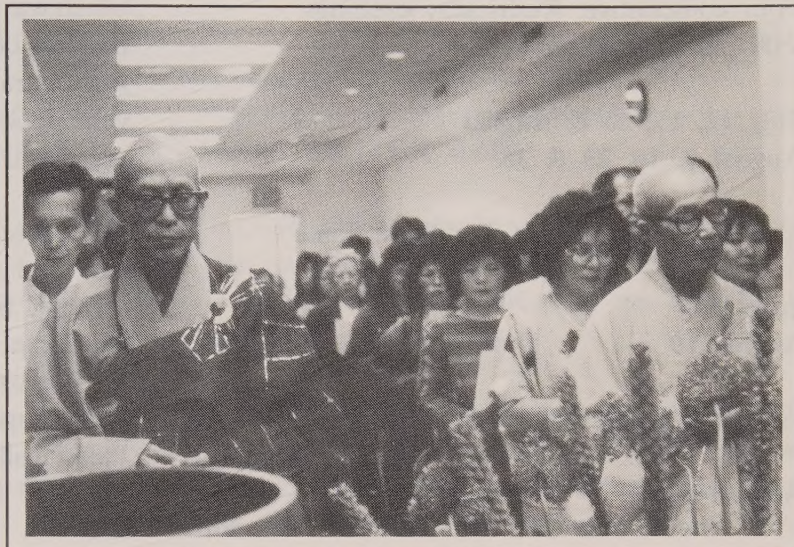


## NEWS & EVENTS

The May 14 Buddha's Birthday Celebration was a joyful event. The festivities began at 10:00 a.m. with chanting of the Heart Sutra, followed by the Bathing of the Buddha ceremony. This ceremony signifies the cleaning of both the body and the mind and it is auspicious for the year ahead.

As our special guest this year, Rev. Jen Jin gave a small Dharma talk before lunch. As usual, lunch was a delicious feast. What the children enjoyed most was the "grab bag" where they each received a gift from each other or one from Shih-fu. Everyone left the center that day with a small gift and a big smile.

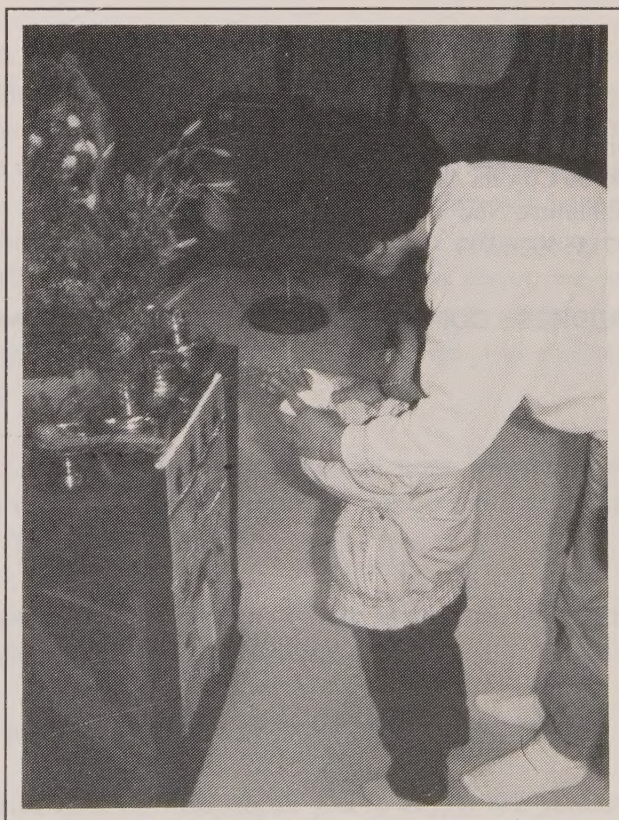
(Pictures of the celebration were taken by Ling-yun Shih, Jimmy Yu and Shaw Wang)



## COMINGS AND GOINGS

■ Shih-fu will be leaving for Taiwan on July 10. In October, he will be leading about 80 participants from Taiwan and New York on a pilgrimage to India. He will be back in New York at the beginning of November.

■ We welcome Guo Chou Shih, our new resident in Ch'an Center. He left home to become Shih-fu's disciple and was ordained in Taiwan last September. Guo Chou Shih lived in the United States for a number of years and he received his master's degree in University of Tulane in 1986. We are happy that he has come to join the center.





**JULY/AUGUST ACTIVITIES:**

Beginner's Meditation Classes:  
Four consecutive Wednesday evenings  
7:00 pm to 9:00 pm

**July 12, 19, 26 & August 2**  
**August 9, 16, 23 & 30**

One-day Recitation of Buddha's Name

**July 15**  
**August 19**

One-day Sitting

**August 4-5**

**RETREAT**

Thirty-five people participated in the May retreat which was crowded. Fortunately we purchased the building behind the center which will provided us with extra space. The upcoming retreats in November 24-December 1 and December 25-January 1 will be roomier.

The center is supported by donations from members and friends. We need your help – either through financial contributions or donation of your time. We are in a crucial stage of our growth. We welcome your tax-deductible donations and your support in all our efforts and activities. Please call the center (718) 592-6593 or fax (718) 592-0717 for any information or registration.

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